

Ceske Slovanska Lipa Opera House

by RUTH PECH GILLESPIE

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Earliest Arrivals and Lodges

Long before the Civil War, immigrants from Bohemia and Slovakia were arriving and settling in the city and county of Manitowoc. There were farmers, smiths, carpenters, millers, shop keepers and many other craftsmen and tradesmen among their number, industrious ambitious people determined to be successful in their new homeland.

Many of these young men left their home and work to fight with the Union Army during the Civil War.

Like immigrants of all nationalities they were a closely knit group, spending many leisure hours together, as well as working together. Before 1870 the local chapter number 132 of the Fraternal Lodge C.S.P.S., briefly called 'Cez Pas' was organized.

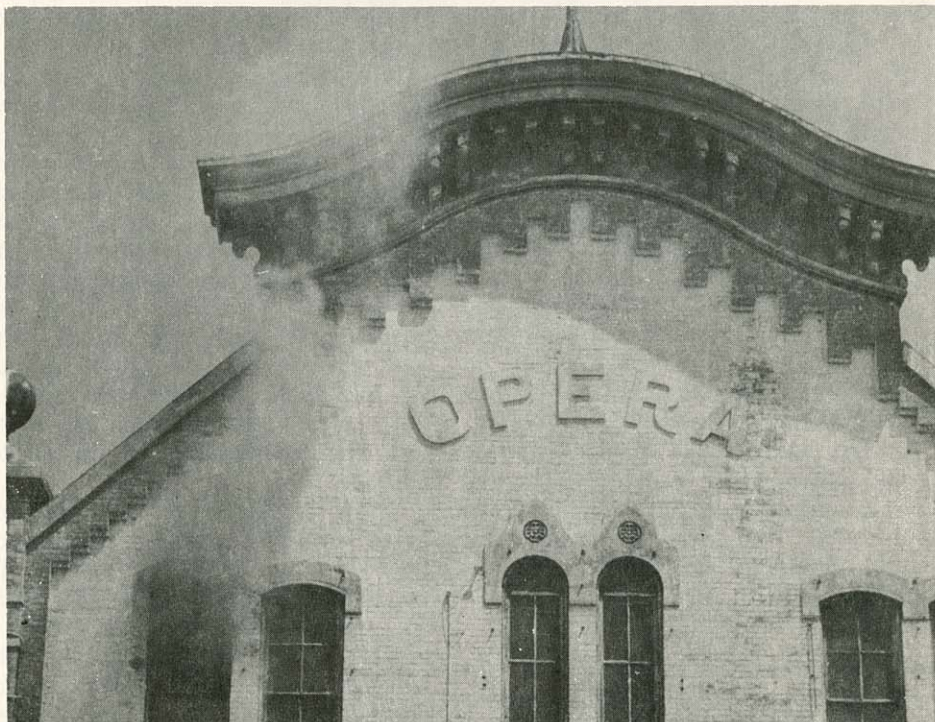
Charles Sindelar of this city loaned to me the only existing record of the order. In this book on March 13, 1886 the first entry was made. The minutes of each meeting were meticulously recorded in fine script hand writing, in the Bohemian language. Years have faded the ink and much of it is now difficult to decipher.

The meeting is noted as having been held in the lodge room of the Ceske Slovanska Lipa.

Fraternal officers on this date were:

Pres. Charles Salak
Vice-Pres. A. Prohazka
Sec. Frank Sixta
Treas. Vaclav Krajnik
Fin. Sec. John Nespor
Rec. Sec. Joseph Spivacek
Guard Joe Spiegelhauer
Inner Guard Frank Pelisik
Outside Guard M. Warhanik

Courthouse records show that on May 21, 1884 the C.S.P.S. Fraternal order had purchased property on North Eighth Street. The court record reads as follows:



Front of Opera House in 1938

"May 1884 21st day Bernard Brennan and wife Mary sold to Slovanska Lipa Association lot 14 block 117"

The price was \$700.00. This document was witnessed by W.H. Nelson, Justice of the Peace, and Maggie Fitzgerald. The South one half of lot 14 makes up part of the Opera House site.

Courthouse records show that on Jan. 19, 1870 the "Slovanska Lipa" association purchased Lot 15 Block 117 from the "village and county of Manitowoc and the State of Wisconsin", for the sum of four hundred dollars. Trustees acting for the association were W. Schimonek, F. Stupecky, and Frank Kostoulatsky. Register of Deeds John O. Franz.

An entry in the C.S.P.S. record of 1886 notes that "Jneno Radu" (name counsel) agree that the name Manitowoc Slovanska Lipa Chap. 132 C.S.P.S. was to be adopted.

Another notation was that "members must be Czecho-Slovaks."

By 1889 the Opera House was completed. In 1890 according to a Warranty Deed the "Sokol" an organization of gymnast enthusiasts, became joint owners of the enterprise for a consideration of \$5,000. There is no available record of the "Sokol", but I remember it from about 1912. I recall the late Nespor brothers Bijimil, Zdenek, Ladimar and Milosh were all enthusiastic participants. The "Sokol" enjoyed a large membership since most of the younger generation of Czechs and Slovaks also joined.

A large nicely equipped gymnasium on the first floor of the Opera House was the scene of their gymnastic prowess. These avid athletes practiced diligently in preparation for exhibits.

Courthouse records revealed a transaction that took place in 1893.

It ran as follows:

"Know ye—

Frank Zeman, John Peterik, Jos. Clyda, Trustees of Manitowocka Slovanska Sijna nr. 132 C.S.P.S. and Jos. Kaderabek, Anton Mlada and Adolph Cizek Trustees of the Ceske Americky Sokol of Manitowoc, parties of the first part, sold N 1/2 of lot 14, N of standing building Slovanska Lipa, to John Nespor."

In this conveyance was the stipulation, if the structure to be built on this half lot should be lost in a fire, the lot was to revert to the 'Lipa'.

Sometime after the C.S.P.S. and the Ceske Americky Sokol became joint owners of the Opera House, a third fraternal order desired to become part owners. This group, a chapter of "Zapodne Jednota" (Western Unity), was organized years after C.S.P.S. Its members were also Czechs and Slovaks.

The enterprise strengthened and grew. Stage accommodations were limited, and the owners decided to remedy this shortcoming. Their aspirations were fully realized in 1906.

The late Stephen Krianik managed the Opera House until 1901. In that year my father, Stephen Pech, also deceased, took over the managership and continued in that capacity for two decades — until 1921.

The Building

Of simple Victorian style, the Opera House, was the fulfilled dream of the Bohemian-Slovak chapter 132 of the National C.S.P.S. fraternal order. Constructed of natural brick the Opera House frontage measured fifty feet plus a recessed ell ten feet in width. The rest of the building was sixty feet wide. The structure was one hundred and fifty feet deep and about three and a half stories high.

The pointed gable on the face of the building was capped with an arched cornice which extended from the slanted roof lines down to the side walls. Cornice and roofline were outlined in raised brick arranged in a geometric design. The high point of the cornice was topped with a flag pole.

Each end of the front facade was flanked by a plain brick square pillar crowned with a large matching ball. Pillars and spheres rose above the steeply sloping roof lines of the building.

Five sets of long narrow windows with arched cornices added to its

Victorian flavor. A pair of slim deep windows were set at each side of the theatre entrance. This window arrangement was repeated at the level above, with a fifth set just over the entrance. Carved between the gable cornice and the top level of paired windows in raised letters was the inscription:

CESKE SLOVANSKA LIPA
OPERA
1886

Slightly curving wide banisters enclosed steps which ascended from sidewalk to the wide, double, dark green, recessed theatre doors.

A permanent canopy extended from the theatre entrance to the red brick paved roadway. It both enhanced the building and protected theatre goers from rain and snow. On open nights the canopy brightly lighted was a veritable beacon to all.

A deep moat-like passage extended across the basement level of the building. At each end was a stairway; the one at the north end led to the door of what was once a small library; the stairs on the south end led, conveniently, to the saloon entrance.

John Nespor's stone engraving establishment snuggled up to the Opera House on its north side. To the south a cement paved area which we termed "the alley" separated it from Olson's old livery stable. The theatre fire escape and two service doors opened on to it. Its picturesque quality, however, was due to the great round empty beer barrels that stood in the alley. Here the large cumbersome horsedrawn beer wagons drew up to the street curb. Burly teamsters rolled full casks down the alley and through the side entrance to the barroom; the empties standing in the alley they rolled to the wagons and hoisted to the barrel racks. Here too, cases of wines and liquors were delivered by the late Frank Sixta's wholesale Liquor Store.

When we were children this old alley was a fun place for us. We delighted in climbing upon the large old barrels and leaping off of them.

Balls and Dances

Christmas at the Opera House - 1910

Christmas night at Manitowoc was a gala evening for Bohemians and Slovaks young and old alike. On this night the Czech establishment held their annual Christmas dance at the Opera House. The crowd was enormous.

In preparation for the ball, the green plush theatre seats and the false floors were removed, leaving the dance floor exposed. Waxed and polished, it shone under the radiant crystal chandelier and the glow of all the other lights in the ballroom.

Theatre boxes and the gallery brightly lit and decked with holiday garlands added to the festive mood. In the center of the dance hall the towering Christmas tree stood. Its boughs were laden with red apples, oranges, popcorn balls, and candy of various shapes and colors. Festoons of brilliantly colored lights cascaded down the tree.

About 10:30 P.M. the ropes of lights were lifted from its branches and connected in radial fashion, high overhead, to the gallery and theatre boxes.

While the lights were being removed from the tree children clustered in groups and tingled with anticipation of that crucial moment when the wondrous tree would tip and topple to the floor. The kids were on their mark, all set and ready to go.

As the tree crashed and spilled its spoils, boys and girls dashed forward, encircling the tree, scrambling over its boughs and stripping them of goodies. In a few moments their harvest was complete. Pockets bulging with candy and hands clutching fruit, the disheveled youngsters dashed to friends and relatives to exhibit their bounty.

As I reminisced with Emma Dent, Manitowoc, she recalled: "I ran with the mob one year, and wound up flat on the floor, under a pile of kids. When I finally got out, all I had to show for my trouble was a piece of pink striped ribbon candy. To top it all, my mother scolded me for joining in the rough and tumble."

After the excitement subsided the clean-up crew quickly cleared the mess away and it was time for the grand march.

This event was more sedate and little children as well as older sisters and brothers, took part.

The grand march was always led by a comely young couple. I recall one year these young people were Blanca Nespor (Hendricks) of Manitowoc and the late Ervin Fanta. My sister Elsie recalls clinging to Ervin Fanta's hand while he led her in the procession.

I remember marching hand-in-hand

with Blanca Nespov who wore a dress that enchanted me. It was soft white muslin sprinkled with tiny pink rose buds.

Blanca and Ervin each led a double line of children around the ballroom, down the center, around again and up on to the stage where Santa Claus presented each child with a box of Christmas candy — pink and white and yellow creme bonbons.

Our evening was complete.

Successful Christmas Dances called for much preparation. Every popcorn ball, apple and each piece of candy to be hung on the tree had to have a looped string. Young volunteers spent many hours in the Opera House kitchen at this tedious task. As each piece of candy was tied, it was slipped onto a long horizontal pole until time to trim the tree.

The late Vlasta and Milosh Nespov and their sister, Mrs. Blanca Nespov Hendricks, with the aid of friends tied the candy and fruit. They also folded and filled each candy box with sugar creme bonbons. Trimming the towering tree was left to the young men.

Both kitchen and dining room teemed with activity before a dance. Mary Skala Rein told me about the activities of the Ladies Auxiliary. "Women of the Ceske, Narodni Sdruieni (Boh. Nat'l Assoc.) made all the Knedliki a Zeli (sauerkraut and dumplings); Jiternice (homemade liver sausage) cooked cauldrons of wieners; baked poppyseed and prune kolaches, caraway rye bread and poppyseed horns," she nostalgically recalled. Mary had known and remembered many of these industrious women. "My mother (Mrs. Frank Skala), Mrs. Pilger, Mrs. Simon, Mrs. J.M. Sladkey, Mrs. Slovansky, Mrs. Anton Kostlavy, Mrs. Shimek, Mrs. Frank Kolar and Mrs. Frank Sindelar," she said, and added, "there were others but the names escape me."

Throughout the evening the women were busy serving ravenous dancers who came to the dining room for refreshments.

All the money earned in this endeavor was sent to the "Old Country" to help the people in their struggles for a free republic. This was during World War I in Europe, as early as 1914.

Masquerade Ball

A colorful spirited favorite of the young townspeople was the annual

February Valentine Masquerade ball.

On this night gypsies costumed in brilliant garments, beads and kerchiefs mingled with romping clowns in peaked hats, ferocious bearded pirates, dainty valentines, sedate shepherdesses and protective shepherds each carrying a shepherd's crook. Characters from the pages of Mother Goose and Alice in Wonderland graced the ballroom, along with peddlers displaying their dubious wares to tattered beggars and glib fools, while Shylock pranced about with Dutch twins. Imagination was the keynote of the night's revelry.

At ten-thirty the masquers in procession promenaded before the judges. First, second and third cash prizes were awarded to the best single, pair, and group of masquers. Awards were based upon costumes and most unique ideas portrayed. My sister Mildred recalled, "Once I and some friends masking as gypsies won a prize."

Incidentally, I recall when I was about eight years old, my little friend Martha Dunlap and I were permitted to join the revelers. I was attired in the late Jimmy Olson's brown elf suit resplendent with flying coat tails and jingling bells; and Martha, a miniature jade green and red clown with many a nodding pom-pom, spent the evening dashing about among the masked dancers.

It was Martha's first Opera House outing, and she looked about in wonder. She was entranced by the ivory colored wall medallions done in relief on the soft green walls. The oval wreath of the medallion encircled a coy cupid gazing down upon the dancers.

Although owners of the Opera House sponsored these seasonal balls and a regular dance at least once a month, local groups and individuals rented the ballroom for their functions. At one time Nichlos Haines promoted a "Dreamland Dance" on Wednesday evenings.

The Elks who in those early days had no Club building held their annual Christmas Ball at the Opera House.

Dancing School

During the fall and winter months the late Professor Wirth, dancing instructor from Milwaukee, taught weekly classes at the Opera House. On Fridays after school he held a class in ballroom dancing for youngsters ranging in age from eight to thirteen years.

Fifteen boys and girls attended. The girls enjoyed the hour; for the boys, uncomfortable in Sunday suits and polished shoes, it was a laborious hour to be endured because of parental pressure. Professor Wirth was to be commended for his patience.

Professor Wirth was the epitome of dance masters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was a slender gray-haired gentleman of average height. His beautifully trimmed and shaped gray goatee added to his distinctive appearance.

Formal attire consisting of tails, black bow tie, starched shirt, and patent leather dancing slippers, adequately completed the picture of the perfect dancemaster.

At eight o'clock in the evening the class for Manitowoc's young men and women began. Fifty students standing straight and stiff, in rows of ten, fastened their eyes upon Professor Wirth. With back turned to his students he demonstrated the one-two-three waltz step while he counted aloud. Awkwardly, or gracefully, the class in unison repeated the demonstration.

When the group's progress warranted doing so, Professor Wirth instructed the young people in proper dance position; after which couples practiced dancing together. The dancing class continued for one hour.

During this time, student progress was carefully noted by parents and friends who occupied theatre boxes and balcony. When the hour of instruction was over, seasoned dancers joined the beginners, and ballroom dancing to a full orchestra continued until midnight.

I recall my mother, who was among those observing, laughingly relating how mothers indicated to their young sons whom to dance with. She probably remembered this since Mrs. Luth always directed her son "Sonny" who was all feet, to dance with me.

Before leaving our home for the dance, an inevitable, unavoidable session took place. "Now Ruthie," you dance with the boys who ask you," advised my mother as she put on her gloves. Before I could voice an objection came her final emphatic words, "even if they can't dance."

Co. H Military Ball

Before World War I, Co. H, commanded by Capt. Abel, was the local Home Guard Unit. They held their

annual Military New Year's Eve ball at the Opera House. A very popular affair, it drew record crowds.

At midnight the walls resounded with the gay orchestral strains of "Auld Lange Syne." The revelers lustily sang "If auld acquaintance be forgot..." at the close of the song shouts of 'Happy New Year', festive hats, spiraling colorful paper ribbons and confetti filling the ballroom.

Check Room

At the back of the dance hall was the checkroom. Its walls from floor to ceiling consisted of row upon row of numbered cubicles. My sister Mildred was in charge of it for all the dances. Her assistants were the late Kenneth and Thomas Dorey, sometimes Reinhardt Schwenke or my sister-in-law, the late Mrs. Edwin Pech. All were adept and quick at neatly folding coats, gathering up scarves, hats and rubbers, and stowing them away in a cubicle. The price for checking one's wraps was ten cents. The income for an evening was thirty dollars or more, which meant the checking crew took care of about 300 people.

It was a long night for the checkroom attendants, since they had to stay until every item checked with them had been claimed.

Orchestras

Local orchestras and occasionally orchestras from nearby towns played for the dances.

Manitowoc's "Lyric" Orchestra, lead by Norman Berkedal, was perhaps the most popular. Norman Berkedal, joined by Art Brault, Ben Bartelme, Walter Arndts, and the late Brault brothers Fred and Regis, made up the original group which held together for thirteen years. There were other musicians who played with the regulars at various times. Among them was Melvin Kitzerow who played the piano.

"In later years", Mrs. Berkedal said, "Norman organized and led another orchestra called "Berkie's Bluebirds." She added, "this group played older waltzes such as "Whispering" for more mature dancers."

I clearly remember Mr. and Mrs. Archie Randolph (deceased) played with some of the orchestras. Mrs. Randolph played piano. Mr. Randolph a member of the Marine Band, as well, played xylophone and drums.

Gloe Naidl orchestra of Two Rivers also played for many Opera House dances. Popular dance tunes of



the day included "Whispering," "Tumble Down Shack in Athlone," "Tango," "Stubbling," "Ja-Da," "Carolina in the Morning," "Quaker Down in Quaker Town," "By the Light of the Silvery Moon," "Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland," "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," "K-K-Katie," "Til' We Meet Again," "Valencia," "Dardanella," "Smiles," "Bells Are Ringing," "See You in My Dreams," and "Good Night Ladies."

OTHER ENTERTAINMENT

Poultry Exhibit

The ballroom with its chandelier of glittering crystal prisms and graceful cupid wall medallions, was the site of a variety of events.

Vivid in my memory are the poultry fanciers whose annual exhibits were sponsored by the late Attorney Adolph Schenian. The sawdust covered dance floor was lined with rows of tables, each holding cages of fine specimens of pure-bred chickens.

Brilliantly feathered high-crowned roosters strutted arrogantly within the confines of wire cages. Their clarion calls echoed and re-echoed in the lofty hall.

Great white hens with queer looking downy legs, scratched about cackling contentedly, their beady eyes studying the judges as though soliciting their votes.

Automobile Shows

Another yearly exhibit was the Automobile Show promoted by local car dealers. Models of the day displayed on both dance floor and stage included Oaklands, Maxwells,

Fords, Wintons, Cadillacs, Studebakers and Buicks.

Touring cars were the style at that time. Sedans had not made their entrance, and snap-on curtains with isinglass windows were used in inclement weather.

Cars were high. Prominent mud guards, and running boards extended out from the sides of the relatively narrow vehicles with their spoked wheels.

There were no brightly enameled cars among the models, since anything like a red or apple green body had to be a special order. The interiors were invariably upholstered in black leather or leatherette like the tops. Car tops were also made from other water-proofed canvas-like materials.

Visions of two small one-seater glassed-in electric cars remain in my memory. They were driven about town by the late Mrs. David Douglas I, and the late Mrs. Baensch, wife of Judge Baensch.

Graduation Exercises

Until Lincoln High School was constructed, graduation exercises took place at the Opera House. Members of the graduating class sat on bleachers set up on the stage.

The old Teachers Training School, housed on the second floor of our old Carnegie Library, also used the Opera House for its graduation ceremonies.

CONCERTS

Marine Band

Mrs. Germaine Moser Vondrachek, when I asked her about her father's

band days, graciously loaned me a photostatic copy of his obituary.

In 1902 it was young Frank Moser, a brilliant musician, who organized the first Marine Band and also directed it until his untimely death in 1913 at the age of thirty-five.

After Mr. Moser died the late Emil Sohrweide became band leader. Upon his retirement Mr. Trochell succeeded him.

It was Lester R. Kirchen who told me about Marine Band Concerts held at the Opera House.

"My father (Charles Kirchen, deceased) played baritone saxophone with the Marine Band for many years, and for a period was secretary of the group. I, too, for a time played alto saxophone with the band. I remember the concert the Marine Band gave at the Opera House about 1910," said Lester, warming to the subject. He went on to describe the event. "The bandsmen formed a circle on the red brick paved street, in front of the Opera House, and played a few selections before concert time. It was Frank Moser who directed the band that evening." After a bit he continued, "My father played in that concert."

It must have been a pleasant treat for the outside audience particularly Chief Kratz's fire fighters at the fire station just across the street. In fair weather, when not called to duty, they sat outside on chairs tilted back against the building, observing the activity across the street. And viewing, of course, the passers by, especially, young ladies.

Frequently I heard my older brothers Edwin and Reuben talking about Krehl's Band which Dad had booked in the early 1900's. Kilties Band, a Canadian group, played the Opera House in 1918 or 1919. My sister Mildred and I remember the band very well, since off stage as well as on, the handsome young men were colorfully clothed in the Scotsman's native tartan kilts, braid trimmed jackets, and caps.

"How vividly I can picture one of the good looking Kilties who invited me to go for a walk that spring Sunday afternoon. We strolled along the main streets, and we were the chief attraction — all eyes were on us!" recalled Mildred who at the time was a high school student.

My mother took us to the concert that evening. Over a hundred talented musicians dressed in kilts

and playing instruments that gleamed behind footlights were a sight long remembered.

Monday Music Club

Under the auspices of the Monday Music Club, a series of Concerts was held at the Opera House. Through the efforts of the Club many fine artists performed in the city.

Greek Recital

At one time Vasos Kanellos, a Greek aesthetic dancer resided in Manitowoc. He trained a group of local young girls to assist him and his wife (the late Charlotte Markham) in the presentation of a Greek dance and music recital. If I remember correctly this type of entertainment was a bit over the heads of the audience.

New Theatre Stage

"When we came to Manitowoc from Bohemia in 1905, I was just a little girl," related Mary Skala Rein. "The Opera House," she recalled, "was already quite old. In 1906, the year after our arrival, the new stage unit was built. My father Frank Skala was an expert in cabinet carpentry, and I remember he was employed to do the fine carpentry on the stage. In fact he did all of the cabinet work. Frank and Joe Cerney did all the masonry. In those days the masons had to hand mix all the mortar."

The late Karl Sindelar was one of the Lipa trustees. His son Charles recalled, "I remember my father telling us that 200,000 bricks had been used in the construction of the new stage addition."

New high brick sides extended up from the gymnasium and boiler room walls. The stage and dressing rooms were constructed above the gymnasium and boiler room.

Wide double doors at the rear of the stage opened on to a large platform which stood about twenty-five feet high. A ramp, the width of the platform slanted down at a slow grade to the ground. Here dray wagons drew up to unload and reload scenery and trunks.

Road shows carried their own stage sets and miscellaneous properties but the Opera House possessed a few sets of its own. These were used by bands, visiting concert artists, occasionally by stock companies, and local groups. I recall the sets; one stage drop depicted a street scene with a bridge and river in the background; there was woodland scenery complete

with foliated wings; the third stage set was a living room done in beige and brown. It was the street scene drop that filled the proscenium before curtain time. Directly below the proscenium with its footlights was the orchestra pit.

The theatre's soft green walls were enhanced with cream color wreathed cupids. Cream tones were repeated in scroll-like decorations in other parts of the theatre.

Orchestra seats, cushioned and upholstered in a medium shade of green plush, took up the center front third of the auditorium. These were the highest priced seats in the house. The remaining seats on the main floor were bird's eye maple veneer.

In tier formation, there were three theatre boxes, on each side wall near the stage. These were quite popular with patrons.

Although the gallery was not equipped with arm chairs, it was always sold out. Tickets to the gallery were cheaper and enabled many people of limited means to enjoy theatrical productions.

Windows and open doorways leading to the theatre boxes and exits were draped with deep maroon velvet, hung on heavy brass rings from dark wood poles.

Wall bracketed lights and the massive crystal chandelier provided illumination.

Back stage was an eerie, echoey place when not in use, but we loved to inspect its dark corners, and its dressing rooms. The fly gallery high overhead, hugging the roof, was where scenery not in use was pulled up. It looked to be an interesting place but was off limits to all but stage hands. I recall my late brother Reuben Pech telling of a boyhood experience. Together with Willie Krianik, they climbed the wall ladder to the lofty gallery. They watched a magician's act and learned the secret of the stunt. Bound with heavy rope the magician placed a young lady in a trunk, closing the lid upon her. The young lady made her escape. The bug-eyed boys, saw the heavy rope stretch as she freed herself. They also discovered there was a false panel in the trunk by which she escaped from view.

At the close of the act, the magician spotted the boys scrambling down the ladder. He was furious. He lost no time in reporting the incident to my father. Dad, concealing

his amusement, explained that the boys were accustomed to being about the theatre and knew enough to keep its secrets.

Advertising and Chores

Advance managers of legitimate stage productions and premiere movies arrived a few weeks before the date of showing to take care of advertising. The Brandt Printing Company received the order for programs, and hand bills which had to be folded for door to door delivery. A friend or two joined my sister Elsie and me on Saturday afternoons and together we worked in the lodge room preparing the advertisements for the boys who peddled the flyers from house to house. Dad paid us each a quarter, and kept us supplied with cream soda while we worked.

The late Henry Wullner and his son Skippy took care of the billboards which were located in strategic city and county spots.

Heinrich's Drug Store had charge of advance ticket sales. Prices usually ranged from fifty or seventy-five cents for gallery seats to \$2.50 for orchestra seats.

Newspaper notices were carried in the Manitowoc Herald, as were the reviews. The late William Mackey and Aubrey Egan, Sr. of the newspaper always received complimentary tickets for their wives and themselves.

One of their reviews reported "Sammy the Opera House dog was born there." Sammy was our Spitz, a born extrovert and theatre goer.

At times the chores were so many, that Elsie and I were called into service. One job we hated was dusting all the theatre seats. With strict orders to clean all the chair rungs, we tackled the Saturday morning work armed with old time long handled gray turkey feather dusters.

As I talked over old times with Charles Sindelar he recalled, "I had to help my father clean that massive chandelier. It was let down by heavy ropes; each crystal prism had to be removed, washed, and polished. We had to handle the prisms carefully, but when we finished the chandelier was beautiful."

Iron Circuit

Complete and fully equipped by 1907, the new stage was ready and waiting to be put to use. In 1908 or 1909 the wheels were well in motion.

My father booked productions through the Winfield Theatrical

Agency of Chicago, as did most theatre managers in Wisconsin and neighboring states. In order to make it profitable for a large company to appear for a one night stand, it had to be assured a continuous itinerary. Managers set up what was called 'the iron circuit'. Companies traveling by train arrived in a community, put on an evening performance, and were back on a train by midnight ready for departure. Since all travel was by rail, the name, 'iron circuit' was appropriate.

From 1910 to 1918 legitimate stage productions were at a high level. After this period things slacked off. World War I, declared in 1917, in all probability made travel a bit difficult, since transportation of troops and war materials demanded priority. Then too, movies coupled with vaudeville acts were becoming very popular, and were less costly to produce and transport.

Legitimate Stage Productions

A light veil of snow fluttered lazily down and added to the beauty of the winter night. Sleighs creakingly halted on the snow-packed road before the lighted canopy of the Opera House.

Gentlemen bundled in fur-collared long black coats, and seal skin caps, descended from the sleighs. They were followed by their ladies clothed in the long plush or seal skin coats of the day, fashionably plumed or fur trimmed hats, fur neck pieces and large muffs. Gay chatter and greetings floated on the air as friends met and ascended stairs to the theatre entrance together.

It was nearing curtain time and through the opened door floated the muted sounds of musicians tuning their instruments.

The Bohemian Girl played the Opera House for the first time when my oldest sister Mildred was a very little girl, but not too small to have a memory of that night.

"I was taken back stage to be the Princess Arline who when a child was stolen by the Gypsies," Mildred reminisced. "I cried and cried and could not be stopped. Finally somebody had to go over to Nespors and get Vlasta Nespors to take my place. Vlasta was too big for the part but there was no alternative."

Years later when I was about four or five years old The Bohemian Girl again played the Opera House. This time my father loaned me. I can

remember the young men and girls of the chorus dressed in gay gypsy costumes crowding about me. I recall, to calm any fears I might have, a chorus girl asked me my name. I answered and one of the chorus girls remarked, "Oh, we must be twins; my name is Ruth, too!" They brought the Gypsy King to me, saying, "This is the funny man who is going to carry you." The big man lifted me in his arms and we went on stage, where he held me while he sang his solo.

In the decade from 1909 to 1919 innumerable theatricals played the Opera House. My sister Mildred recalled, "I saw the farces A Pair of Queens, Fair & Warmer, and Abie's Irish Rose."

Musical Comedies we both recalled were Lilac Domino, Chin Chin, Bringing Up Father, My Sammy Girl, Little Johnny Jones. Some of the songs from Little Johnny Jones were "Forty Five Minutes from Broadway," "So Long Mary," and the Clock Song. The backdrop for the "Clock Song" had many clock faces painted on it, each face showing a different hour. As the words, "The Clock struck one," were sung, the clock face set at one o'clock opened and a singing chorus girl popped her head out. The routine continued until all the clocks had struck, and a pretty chorus girl smiled out at the audience from each clock face.

Other musicals were The Katzenjammer Kids, Daniel Boone, and In Old Kentucky. The company In Old Kentucky owned a beautiful horse; in one act the race horse was led on stage by his jockey.

In 1918 the Chocolate Soldier was booked. It was a fine performance teeming with fairy-tale charm.

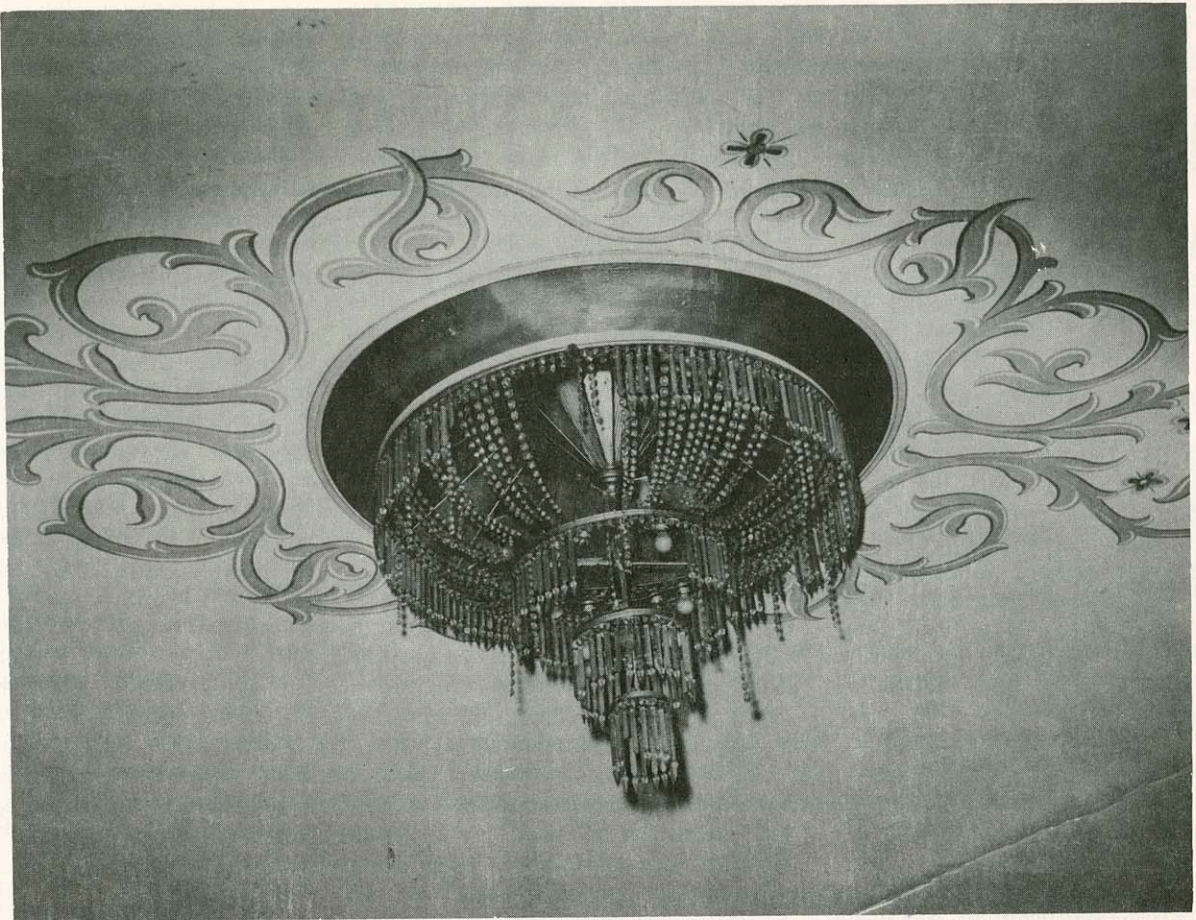
The late Lottie Abel Hatfield, who at that time was my seventh grade teacher in the old Park School, told our class about the enthralling stage production.

"Did anyone here see The Chocolate Soldier?" She positively glowed as she added, "The Lieutenant took me to see it."

"The Lieutenant", we knew was her boyfriend, and we all started to giggle, causing her to blush.

Arthur Kirchen and I mulled over the many productions that had played at the Opera House.

"I remember my mother and dad and I played for the Chocolate Soldier, said Arthur. "My mother played piano, my father and I



The huge chandelier. Unfortunately when the picture was taken some of the prisms were broken or missing.
(Photo courtesy of Manitowoc Herald-Times)



Interior of the Opera House showing some of its ornateness *(Photo courtesy of Manitowoc Herald Times)*

played violin." He added, "I was sixteen when I began to play for shows and dances. I also recall we played for Bringing Up Father, Fair and Warmer, Daniel Boone, and The Katzenjammer Kids. There were other stage productions and premiere movies we played for, but I can't recall them all."

Lester R. Kirchen, himself an excellent saxophonist, remembered seeing the musical Chin Chin. "They had six good saxophone players in the show," he informed me.

Old time Minstrel shows were a delight, and played to capacity houses. The stage was filled with row upon row of young men made up with black faces, and white lips. All the performers were clad in striped tailed suits, top hats, bright bow ties, white spats and white gloves. They entranced the audience with their steady flow of humor, song and dance.

Legitimate Stage Productions

Mary Roberts Rhinehart's House of a Thousand Candles played at the Opera House about 1912.

"A blast of air from back stage caused a candle's flame to touch and ignite a window curtain of the stage set," recalled my sister Mildred who was in the audience. She continued, "One of the actors made a fast move and put out the flame before any real damage was done."

Years ago the late F.X. Murphy wrote an article for the Manitowoc Herald newspaper. Part of the article related to a box found in the cornerstone of the old Crystal Theatre which was undergoing renovation. In the box was an old newspaper printed in 1910. A news item announced, "The Soul Kiss" with a cast of seventy-five people will soon play at the Opera House. All seats will be reserved. Admission is \$1.50."

In this same article F.X. Murphy noted that admission to the Crystal theatre in 1910 was fifteen cents for adults.

Stock companies were enthusiastically received. The earliest one my sister recalled was the Hetner Stock Company.

"I remember Hope Hetner who traveled with her parents and the troupe. The Hetners rented rooms from Julia Sklut's parents. Hope was older than Julia and I but we played together," recalled my sister Mildred.

Winniger's Stock Co., Uncle Tom's

Cabin (which my sister saw twenty-eight times), and Peck's Bad Boy were perennial favorites.

Winnigers like all stock companies played for a week. My late brother Reuben and Edwin were young boys when the Winnigers first began to play at the Opera House about 1909 or 1910.

Frank Winniger, the oldest member of the family, was invariably cast in comedian or character roles. I recall a performance when Frank stepped out on stage between acts and eloquently recited a sad sentimental poem. It was all about his aged mother's silvery gray hair. Frank's audience was deeply moved. He brought the house down when he closed his eulogy with the words, "But what if I should find that gray hair in my soup?"

Charles Winniger, who many years later became a successful movie actor, and his brother Adolph, had leading roles in stock dramas.

I remember my brother Reuben Pech telling us about the afternoon ball games played back of the Opera House. The Winniger's spent many hours with my brothers Reub and Ed and the neighborhood youngsters pitching and batting in ball games.

Uncle Tom's Cabin was the delight of young and old alike. The company played the theatre twice a year; swarms of children attended the matinee. My sister Mildred said, "I never missed a matinee or an evening performance." My record attendance was high but could not touch my older sister Mildred's.

Vivid in my memory is Eliza who with her child clasped to her bosom precariously crossed the frigid waters of the river by leaping from shifting ice floe to shifting ice floe. She escaped the clutches of Simon LeGree and his frustrated baying bloodhounds.

The closing scene of Uncle Tom's Cabin showed Eva going to heaven. She made a beautiful little angel, but it was the ethereal stage set that impressed me. The frothy net and lace which surrounded Eva was as ornate and delicate as an old Victorian Valentine.

Stage Hands and Electricians

The late Midge Krahn was the Opera House stage manager. His crew were electrician, my late brother Edwin Pech, and stage hands, the late Wallie Drill, Joe Peterson, Buck Sawyer, Ariel Brandt and Red John-

son. John Shemchak, and Frank Sokowski both deceased were film projectionists who with Wallie Drill also operated the spotlight for legitimate stage productions.

I recall the old colored slides which the projectionists flashed on the screen when it became necessary to mend or change a reel. They read 'One Minute Please' and 'One Moment Please.'

The stage crew was kept busy from the time a company's trunks and scenery arrived at the stage door via dray wagons, until the show was over and all equipment was reloaded and on its way to the Chicago Northwestern depot. Stage hands worked with clocklike precision; by eleven o'clock the stage was clear.

While the boys worked hard and fast they enjoyed their work. I recall my brother Edwin telling about an incident which happened when he was about twenty years old. He was standing back stage near a wing entrance with a cigarette in his mouth. Chorus girls ready to go on stage stood nearby. A young lady stepped out of the chorus line, reached for Edwin's cigarette, took a puff, put it back, and returned to her position with the dancers. Years later Edwin recognized her in a movie. She was Barbara Stanwyck.

Movies

When premier movies, and legitimate stage productions did not have their own musicians, the Kirchen played.

"The film The Birth of a Nation had its own pianist and one violinist", remembered Arthur Kirchen "but I, too, played violin with them. Some of the old heart songs featured were "In the Gloaming," "Kingdom Coming" and the picture's haunting theme melody "Perfect Song."

D.W. Griffith's masterpiece of silent movies starred Lillian Gish while Henry Walthal portrayed the little colonel. Other favorites of the silent screen cast in the picture were the Harron brothers and Mae Marsh.

Another D.W. Griffith success was Heart's of the World, based upon W.W.I. Both Gish girls, Lillian and Dorothy, starred in the silent film.

The Lost Battalion a film portrayal of W.W.I. was another picture shown at the Opera House.

When the silent film Lym Howe, a travelogue, was run, appropriate audio effects were produced manually backstage; heavy brushes

coarse sand papers, tom toms, cymbal and trumpets were used to produce sounds of water falls, ocean waves and other noises peculiar to each scene.

Other outstanding movies shown at the Opera House were Shepherd of the Hills, Clara Kimball Young starring in Eyes of the World, Orphans of the Storm featuring Lillian Gish and Richard Bartholomew, and Mabel Normand in Mickey.

Mr. Fisher, the manager who traveled with the film Mickey, was a singer of no mean ability. During the intermission he sang the theme song "Mickey" to a young lady. I was thirteen at the time, and I was the young lady Mr. Fisher sang to in the short act. Clothed in the late Jimmy Olson's old shirt, long trousers, and old shoes, wearing stage makeup which Mr. Fisher applied I became Mickey. I was seated on a bench while he stood by my side singing the theme song to me. At proper intervals I followed previous coaching and shyly glanced up at him. For a good many years I was 'Mickey' to Milosh Nespov and the stage hands.

Cleopatra starring Theda Bara did not fare well in the city. The film had been advertised for some time; the film's manager with the picture had arrived in the city. Representatives of a local women's organization approached my father and declared they believed it was not a proper film to show. The film manager and my father told the women they could preview the picture, and decide whether it could be shown or not. That afternoon the projectionist ran the film for the women of the organization. No one walked out, but when the show was over they decided it was indecent and not to be shown. Dad cancelled the engagement.

SOKOL

Sokol, the gymnast's organization, had been active for many years before it became a joint owner of the Opera House in 1892.

I spent an interesting hour with Julia Nespov Geisler who at age 84 is an attractive white-haired charming person. Her eyesight has grown dim through the years yet she remembered a few things about the old days at the Opera House.

"In the earliest days my father John Nespov directed the gymnastic group." Julia stated. "When my

brothers Milosh and Ladimar were young men they took over the guidance and training of the 'turners'. My brother Bijimil and Zdenek were also active members, as were Joe Kaderabek and Anton Kostlovy. You may know that Joe had a shoe store in Manitowoc and Anton was a pharmacist in Heinrich's drug store."

Julia lamented the fact that her memories were not too clear, but never-the-less she went on with her story.

"The Sokol put on numerous gymnastic exhibits. Many of these performances took place before 1906 when the new stage was built. The young men who took part in the acts wore white sleeveless jerseys, and white trousers with black belts."

Julia settled back in her chair and shyly smiled. "You know, when I was 16 my sisters and I attended the 'turning class' for young women. We were quite a group dressed in white middies with black ties, full black bloomers, black stockings and soft shoes. We worked on the rings and the 'horses'." She went on to say, "We, too, put on pageants at the Opera House. Members of the drill team were arranged in groups - three lines of girls made up each group. We all carried two colored wands, one in each hand, and did our gymnastic figures with them. Our marching drills we demonstrated in the ballroom."

When I was in high school I recall one of my teachers bought three tickets from me. One for each nightly performance."

OCHOTNIK

"Ochotnik was the amateur theatre guild," reminisced Mary Skala Rein. "The group was already organized when we came to Manitowoc from Bohemia in 1905. Some of the active members I knew and remember are the late Frank Cerneys, Joe Cerneys, Karel Sindelars, Mr. Vitek, the tailor, the Joseph F. and Joseph M. Sladkys and my mother, Anna Skala. They drew crowds from all over the county." Mary explained. "All monies cleared from their amateur productions were sent to Bohemia along with profits from food sales, to help the people through the rough days of political and religious unrest until after World War I, when Tomas Masaryk became president of the newly formed Czechoslovakia."

While I was visiting with Julia Nespov Geisler, she recalled, "I went

to see one of the Ochotnik shows, with the late Joe Ledvina. His younger brother, the late Att. Lawrence Ledvina took part in the play that night." She continued, "Anton Kostlovy, a pharmacist, and Joseph Kaderabek who ran a shoe store were also active in Ochotnik and the Sokol in the late 1800's and early 1900's."

Lucy Dufek, whose father, the late Joe Dufek, was a blacksmith in the Mishicot area, shared her memories with me. "I remember when my father and mother together with the late Anton Grecareks, Mrs. Finnel, and many other Bohemians living in or around the villages of Melnik, Larabee, and Francis Creek, went to see the Ochotnik melodramas at the Opera House." She went on, "to attend a Bohemian farce or musical with singing and dancing, was a big outing. I know the late Adolph Stroufs who lived in Melnik always attended the productions. Adolph, by the way, was the assemblyman for his district."

Although I know placards advertising coming events were displayed in public places, I asked, "Lucy, how did so many people learn about coming attractions?"

Lucy paused to refresh her memory and then picked up the thread of her story. "A hardware drummer, who lived in Manitowoc but sold hardware for a Chicago concern, was a regular newspaper! He always visited my dad. My mother hated to see him coming because it meant too many beers at the village saloon. Soon a crowd gathered around the drummer and listened while he enthusiastically informed them about activities soon to take place at the Opera House." Lucy laughingly continued, "He traveled all over the county, and I'll bet he spread the word in every saloon, as well as every country store and blacksmith shop."

Prodding her memory once more she said, "Another good source of advertising was Pech's Brass Band. Joseph M. Pech, Sr. was the bandmaster. His four sons Boleslav, Joseph, Albin and Robert, together with some other musicians residing in Kossuth township, made up the group. They were well known and in demand for dances throughout the county. Whenever they played they spread the word about Ochotnik and Sokol entertainment." "Why, Joseph M. Pech was my father's older

brother," I told her.

"Lucy," I questioned, "how did your parents and other rural residents get to the theatre?"

"In winter by horse and cutter, bundled up to their chins in heavy long coats, wool scarfs, warm caps pulled down over their ears, and hot bricks at their feet. They were covered with a heavy fur cutter robe, and looked like Eskimos. In mild season the farmers used horse and buggy." "Later," related Lucy, "my father bought an Oakland car, but in winter they still had to depend upon the horse and cutter."

THE WINE CELLAR

An off limit interesting spot was the cool, dark wine cellar tucked away in a remote corner of the basement. The wine racks held dozens of tall slim colored glass bottles tightly corked and waxed. Beautiful dark green bottles of champagne were also stored here.

One Saturday morning my father directed my then teenaged brother Reuben and Reub's friend Willie Krianik to clean up the wine cellar. It seems they divided their time between cleaning and sampling.

The job done, the boys started for home but Willie, who was riding his bicycle, had trouble steering. To alleviate matters Reuben decided to take over. With Willie perched on the handle bars Reuben had pedaled the bicycle about a block when Willie fell off but was unharmed. Although progress was slow, the boys made it home.

Early the next morning Mrs. Stephen Krianik, Willie's mother, much incensed, informed my mother, "Your Reuben rode over Willie's stomach with the bicycle yesterday and Willie was sick all night!"

My mother did not dispute her diagnosis nor did she question Willie's tale. Silently she listened to the recital while in her mind she pieced together the events of the night before. Reuben had voiced no complaints but had been suspiciously quiet. Through the night several times he had tiptoed out of the house and dashed down the path to the backyard 'room.'

My mother had been fully aware of his nocturnal flights and correctly surmised the role the wine cellar had played in the episode.

THE OLD SALOON

A long mahogany bar ranged along

the north side of the Opera House saloon. The top of the bar was like a cornice supported at each end by a round mahogany pillar. Front and end sides were decorated with cording to form panels.

Architectural characteristics of the Victorian era were prevalent in the service bar and the back bar. At ceiling height a projecting cornice of panels and beading rested on tall mahogany Corinthian style columns, and formed the frame of the long traditional back bar mirror. At the base of the polished glass was the counter top of the storage cupboards. Reflected in the mirror were the colorful liquor, liqueur and wine bottles displayed on the counter; there were also boxes of cigars, cigarettes and candy bars. The old cash register, which rang out merrily each time a deposit was made, occupied a prominent spot at the end of the back bar shelf.

A large old-fashioned walk-in ice box, part mahogany and part glass, completed the section topped by the expansive mahogany cornice.

At the far end of the service bar an appetizing free lunch consisting of sliced bologna, cheese, tiny dried salted smoked fish, crackers and Bohemian caraway rye bread was always available to the patrons.

The rear of the bar was equipped with gleaming copper shelves holding the supply of various kinds of glasses. The copper shelf also had sunken copper vats in which glasses were washed. The metal backing of the shelf concealed the beer barrels with their set-in spigots for drawing draft beer.

It was not unusual for a customer to come in carrying a pail to purchase a quart of drawn beer. My father used to tell us about a man who habitually sent his young son with a lightly greased tin pail for a quart of beer. The coating of grease kept the beer from foaming and insured a full bucket of brew... of course somewhat flat to the taste.

On busy nights extra bartenders were on duty to handle the crowd. I remember the head fulltime bartender very well. As a small child I played with his large old gold pocket watch, opening and closing its engraved cover. He was the late Anton Kazda, a gracious, kind, gray-haired man with a quiet friendly voice and manner.

Tap room furnishings included a round golden oak card table which

accommodated eight players. Beside each place on the under side of the large table was a small shelf designed to hold one large 'shooper' (schooner) of beer.

Julia Nespor Geisler and I were chatting about the Opera House and she recalled, "I remember my father spent every Sunday afternoon playing cards with his friends at the Opera House."

On winter evenings friends sat down at the card table for friendly games of pinochle. Money never changed hands; losers set up a round of five or ten cent beers.

During the winter months the pot-belly stove stood near the card players' area and sent out welcome warmth. Behind the coal stove in an alcove was an old battered leather arm chair where Archibald, a white terrier, napped. A stray puppy, he wandered into the saloon one day and decided to stay. The stage hands and Dad promptly dubbed him Archibald.

The terrier shared his comfortable chair with Wallie Stauss. Wallie was another stray Dad looked after. Wallie was not overly bright but he was a good handyman and night watchman. We all liked harmless Wallie. He was the brunt of many practical jokes dreamed up and put into action by the stage crew. In reality everybody was kind to old Wallie.

The southwest corner of the saloon was paneled and served as the office. It was simply furnished with an old safe, roll top desk, a high counter holding an assortment of account and date books, pencils, pen holders, pens, pen wipers and blotters. A large calendar advertising Sixta's Liquor hung on the wall above the desk. But it is the old fashioned pedestaled tilting, swivel chair I recall most vividly. When we were children waiting to talk to Dad we whiled away the minutes spinning ourselves around and around in the fascinating office chair.

Women and children were never present in the barroom; it was strictly a man's haven. Only after theatre productions were we allowed to snoop around the place. At such times we inserted pennies in the vending machine attached to the wall, and waited for the not too fresh salted peanuts to roll out into the machine's serving tray.

After shows our family members went downstairs to wait for

father. Patrons had all gone home and dad and my sister-in-law who sold theatre tickets finished checking in the evening's proceeds. Soon the stage crew members wandered in to report that the theatre was dark and all was in order. The boys stood at the bar relaxing with a glass of beer and mulling over the events of the evening.

One snowy winter night we had to take our wheelbarrow home; it had been used in the evening's performance. This particular night Buck, one of the stage hands who lived in our neighborhood, had imbibed in one too many beers. This was apparent when Buck, usually very sober, began to call his co-workers an 'old tomato can'. Dad and the boys chuckled and decided it was time for all to go home. Coats were donned, all but night lights extinguished, and doors checked. We all said goodnight to Wallie the watchman who locked the main door after us. Soon we were trudging along in the newly fallen snow with one of the boys laboriously pushing the unwieldy wooden wheelbarrow. Buck's progress was slow; the boys hoisted him into the hand cart and wheeled him all the way home.

CONCLUSION

About 1920 and early 1921 the curtain began a slow descent upon the Opera House. Changing times and progress started to take their toll. Road shows became less prevalent. Larger movie houses such as Manitowoc's Capitol Theatre built by the local George brothers, and Kadow's Mikado Theatre were mushrooming all over the country. Often theatre leases were held by promoters; the Capitol was leased to the Aschers of Chicago for a period of years. In lieu of legitimate stage productions there were vaudeville acts coupled with movies. The newer theatres were in a position to convert to talkies when the latter came into being.

Prohibition played a major role; the Opera House establishment could no longer look to barroom receipts, an important source of income.

Nationally known dance bands began to make appearances in focal communities of sizeable populations. Better built, more dependable automobiles and roads simplified travel. People drove to the Aragonne in Chicago or the Bay Beach dance pavillion in Green Bay, where they listened and danced to the music of

Rudy Vallee, Wayne King, Fred Waring, Paul Whiteman and other big name bands. Local dances lost their glamour and their patrons.

From 1921 onward the Opera House managership and ownership changed hands a number of times. Efforts to reinstate the old spirit were to no avail.

Stripped of its canopy and engraved identification which read "Ceske Slovanska Lipa Opera 1886," the building stands desolate, mute, abandoned, awaiting the devastating hand of demolition. Years ago vandals destroyed the beautiful crystal chandelier, the lovely medallions on the theatre walls, and ripped to shreds the stage scenery.

Although the Opera House is lost to us, cherished memories of happy hours spent there live on.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indeed grateful to the people I interviewed and mentioned in this paper for the hours and memories they so graciously shared with me.

The assistance Miss Agnese Dunne gave me was invaluable.

Mrs. Emma Dent volunteered and devoted many hours to typing the story of the Opera House for me.

With the assistance of Louise Kodet, a general Courthouse employee, I gathered information pertaining to the land purchases from old records in the Register of Deeds office.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF RUTH PECH GILLESPIE

A native of Manitowoc, my childhood school days started at the old northside Park School with its belfry housing the large bell which rang out melodiously calling us to our studies.

Classes at Washington High School and later Lincoln High School followed, with graduation in 1925. I received by B.S. degree from the U. of W. at Madison in 1930. My major was Applied Arts, my minor Agriculture (Landscape Design and Horticulture). After graduation I was face to face with THE depression. Fortunately I was able to secure a position teaching Landscape Design for the American Landscape School in Des Moines, a correspondence school. The depression brought this position to an end.

Later while doing Occupational and Recreational Therapy at the State Hospital at Mendota I again taught Landscape Design but on a part time basis for the U. of W. Extension Division. After two years of occupational therapy, I accepted a position with the Wisconsin Rehabilita-



Mrs. Ruth Pech Gillespie

tion Department as "itinerant arts and crafts instructor for the homebound handicapped people residing in Brown County." During this time I continued my part time teaching for the U. of W. Extension Division, spending alternate weekends in Madison.

After a few years I decided to go into social service work and joined the Dane County Pension Department as a caseworker. Meanwhile I married J. Parker Gillespie, Madison's Chrysler dealer, and soon after devoted all my time to being a housewife.

Our home was picturesquely situated on the Yahara River with access to Lake Mendota, Lake Monona and Lake Waubesa. We were avid boaters and enjoyed many hours on the river and lakes.

I spent much time gardening, building pools, patios and rock gardens. We traveled a good deal, either on business or for pleasure to many parts of the United States, Canada and the Caribbean area.

My husband's death in 1959 brought its changes. I decided to teach art and attended the University to pick up credits for my teacher's certificate. Until 1970 I taught elementary and secondary art in Wisconsin schools.

In time I purchased a home in Manitowoc. My interests are pretty much unchanged. Gardening on a smaller scale, arts and crafts, reading, travel in this country and abroad and more recently writing, absorb my time.

The story I wrote pertaining to the Opera House came about when I joined Miss Agnese Dunne's Creative Writing class. So many years of our family life had revolved about the Opera House during the time Dad managed it, that I decided to write as much of its early history as I was able to recall or uncover.

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